

Madison Symphony Orchestra excels with Olga Kern and three from Beethoven

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Isthmus

02/09/2009

An all-Beethoven lineup is pretty much a guaranteed formula for success with today's audiences. That is what the Madison Symphony Orchestra could count on in its concerts last weekend. Not content with choosing three surefire hits for the program, Maestro John DeMain then threw more fuel on the fire with exuberant and assertive direction.

The "Leonore Overture No. 3" is an amazing conflation of dramatic representation and Classic sonata-form, one of the most ambitious opera overtures composed before Wagner, and one that proved its impracticality for Beethoven's one effort in lyric theater. This particular overture holds some technical traps for the players, especially the strings, but the MSO forged through it with flair under DeMain's blazing direction.

He had a partner for the next round, the remarkable young Russian pianist Olga Kern, as guest soloist. A lovely woman with genially businesslike bearing, musicianship in her genes, and fiery digits, she shared DeMain's bold approach to the "Piano Concerto No. 3". Composed in the key of C minor, a tonality often reserved only for the most dramatic and even tragic statements, this is the darkest and most theatrical of Beethoven's five essays in the form.

In the first movement, Kern's playing was aptly stormy and tumultuous, with just hints of delicacy in the cadenza and in the movement's final buildup. Delicacy seemed to me to be carried a bit far in the pensive slow movement, which was given a little too much of a Chopinesque flexibility for my taste. But Kern was again stylishly and compellingly fleet-fingered in the finale.

Lest we doubted her technical prowess, as an encore she whizzed through an unbelievably virtuosic showpiece by Moritz Moszkowski titled "Étincelles" ("Sparkles"). Clearly, Kern is an astonishing performer with dazzling possibilities for the years ahead.

For the final round with Beethoven, the orchestra confidently took on the "Symphony No. 7", regarded as the most strikingly "unbuttoned" of his major works. DeMain led his troops into it with sometimes almost ferocious energy. The first movement was given notably boisterous treatment. The eloquent beauties of the gorgeous slow movement were delivered within tight controls of texture. The main sections of the impish scherzo scampered with unusual wickedness around the solemn protests of the trio section -- unconventionally given a second statement by the composer. DeMain pulled out the stops in a frenetic, explosive rendering of the final movement. All of which could not fail to bring the audience to its feet.